

The effects of family variables on school bullying

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Abstract

Bullies, victims and bully/victims were more likely to experience the authoritarian style of parenting. The authoritative parenting style was significant in creating non-bullies and non-victims. This critical analysis examines eight studies and considers the effects of family variables, including secure and insecure attachment, family disharmony, and socioeconomic status on school bullying.

Keywords: School bullying; families; parenting styles; socioeconomic status



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Introduction

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of bullying in Primary schools compared with other countries. An international mathematics and science study reported that 68% of Year 5 students were victims of bullying either weekly or monthly at school (Caygill, Kirkham, & Marshall, 2013). Bullying is defined as threatening behaviour repeated over time and includes physical, verbal, and non-verbal harassment (Education Review Office, 2007), and more recently cyber bullying (Boyd & Barwick, 2011).

School-based interventions have proven to be moderately successful (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1994) however, there is a need to understand how children become bullies/victims and non-bullies/victims (Bowers et al., 1994). The family as a child's primary social agent (Papanikolaou, Chatzikosma, & Kleio, 2011) provides some insight into students' adoption of specific bullying and victim roles.

This literature review will discuss parenting styles with reference to cohesion of the family unit. It will critically analyse eight peer-reviewed studies from an overseas context, with a specific focus on the effects of family relationships on bullying roles. The community environment is discussed, and whether socioeconomic status (SES) is a determinant of bullying behaviour is addressed.

Types of Variables

Authoritarian Parenting - a child-rearing practice characterised by unkindness and punishment (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004). Georgiou (2008) describes it as controlling where unreasonable limits and expectations are set for children.

Authoritative Parenting - supports children's independence and autonomy (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004). This type of 'responsiveness' parenting makes provision for children's needs and positive communication (Georgiou, 2008).

Attachment Theory - the type of interactions between the child and the caregiver that develop into either secure or insecure relationships (Bowers et al., 1994).

Family disharmony - relates to the lack of cohesion within the family environment. In less cohesive families, family members are ambivalent about supporting each other in relationships (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004).

Effects on Roles in Bullying

Studies have shown the two types of parenting styles discussed (authoritarian & authoritative) and attachment theory, impact on children's development and the roles children take within peer relationships at school. In studies that examined parenting behaviours, Ahmed and Braithwaite (2004) found bullies were more likely to experience the authoritarian parenting style. Furthermore, these authors and Aslan (2011) found that authoritarian family environments also produced victims. This correlation between the authoritarian style and both bullying and victim roles is supported by Papanikolaou et al. (2011) and Aslan (2011) who noted that mothers who display authoritarian type punishment without justification increased the risk of their children becoming bullies at school. Moreover, the authoritarian parenting style produced a category of children who identified as bully/victims. These are children who engage in bullying behaviour and are the recipients of bullying (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004). This was supported by Shields and Cicchetti (2001) who reported that children who were abused by their caregivers had a greater chance of becoming bully/victims.

Studies found the authoritative style of parenting in which children experienced non-stigmatised shaming and had positive relationships with their parents meant children were less likely to become bullies (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004). This notion is discussed by Aslan (2011) who examined relationships between parenting behaviours and self-esteem and found that mothers' positive relationship with their children resulted in higher self-esteem and self-confidence. Conversely, negative relationships existed between strict parental controls and self-esteem. Bowers et al. (1994) described both bullies and victims having low self-esteem and a correlation between low self-esteem and victimisation. The author implies that a positive relationship with parents has an impact on bullying behaviour, as students were less likely to become bullies and victims. While this is not directly stated the author alludes to this idea.

In a study by Finnegan, Hodges and Perry (1998) to test whether effects of parenting behaviours were different for boys and girls, they found that overprotective parents led to a greater risk for boys becoming victims. This correlation is supported by authors Bowers et al. (1994) and Georgiou (2008). Finnegan et al. (1998) also found girls were at greater risk of becoming victims if they felt rejection or hostility from their mothers. Alternatively, a lack of support and protection from parents meant a greater chance of children becoming bullies. The authors imply that the extreme ends of parenting styles (overprotective and under protective) cause children to take on bullying roles. While no author directly states this, Finnegan et al. (1998), Georgiou (2008) and Bowers et al., (1994) allude to this idea. The findings suggest the authoritative parenting style set children up to do well socially at school (Georgiou, 2008).

When the variable of gender was accounted for in abusive families, Shields and Cicchetti (2001) found there was no significant difference and both sexes were at greater risk of becoming bullies as well as victims. Finnegan et al. (1998) examined how parenting behaviours which restricted children's 'gender normative' development, described as autonomy for boys and connectedness for girls, placed children at greater risk of victimisation. They found overprotective mothers inhibited boys' dispositional learning such as building courage and independence, and similarly mothers' hostility and rejection limited girls' chances of developing social skills relating to effective communication with their peer groups. A weakness of this study is that it was undertaken in the 1990s in a decade where gender roles were still accepted. Additionally, the absence of fathers was seen as significant. Authors Bowers et al. (1994) and Papanikolaou et al. (2011) reported that children without fathers in the home have a greater chance of becoming bullies, bully/victims, or victims.

In studies that investigated attachment behaviours, children who identified themselves as either victims or bullies had insecure attachments with their parent or family members (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004). This is supported by Bowers et al. (1994) who found that children who were independent of their caregiver both physically and emotionally were more likely to become bullies, and children who were anxious around their caregiver had a greater risk of becoming victims. Children with secure attachments were more likely to avoid bullying behaviour.

In studies that looked at family disharmony, Bowers et al. (1994) found bullies exhibited low cohesion with family members, especially siblings, while surprisingly, victims' demonstrated high cohesion with all family members. This research links with Finnegan et al. (1998) who found

overprotective parents created victims. Similarly, they found children who identified as non-bullies and non-victims viewed their family environments as cohesive where the mother and father had equal power relationships and the level of parental involvement was low on neglect. This supports Georgiou's (2008) assertion that authoritative parenting facilitates children becoming non-bullies and non-victims at school.

The Community Environment

A meta-analysis by Tippet and Wolke (2014) found a correlation between SES and its effects on children's social roles. The strength of this study was that it reviewed 28 studies in total. It found in areas of low SES there was a greater chance of victimisation and children who identified as bully/victims. It identified lower SES areas using the authoritarian parenting style, involving harsher punishment and sibling violence. It described in high SES areas there was low victimisation. The authors acknowledged limitations of this study in that the results were weak statistically. The authors therefore alluded to the reasons for a direct relationship between low SES and victims including, coming from a lower SES environment or lack of disposable income for lifestyle goods, rather than individual characteristics. The same inference was made to children living in higher SES areas such as having 'cultural capital' to minimise bullying.

The authors imply that parenting styles are only partially a factor in bullying behaviour, in contrast to the evidence given by the authors earlier. This notion is supported by Boyd and Barwick (2011) who identified bullying in the contemporary New Zealand context as a 'socio-ecological phenomenon' where research has gone beyond the individual and family to a focus on the wider context. Tippet and Wolke (2014) highlighted that bullying could not be predicted by families' SES, and bullying interventions should target children from all areas. Holism is the present focus for finding explanations for bullying in schools (Boyd & Barwick, 2011).

Conclusion

This literature review has critically examined the effects of family variables, focusing on authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles, attachment theory, and family disharmony. Consideration has been offered on the SES of families.

The findings showed that children who identified as bullies and victims came from families where parents practised the authoritarian style. The parenting behaviour that resulted in children having positive experiences with peers at school and more likely to become non-bullies and non-victims was the authoritative style. The findings also suggest that children who develop insecure attachments with parents have a greater risk of becoming either bullies or victims. Furthermore, bully/victims and victims came from lower SES, but factors from living in those areas were attributed to the bullying behaviour and not the individual. This and current New Zealand research indicate it is the wider environment making a difference.

As a pre-service teacher I understand that consideration of family variables alone including family SES, does not solve bullying at school. It is a combination of family variables, peer relationships, school initiatives and the environment that will have the desired effect.

Further Research Questions

- What are parents' perceptions and conceptualisations of bullying that construct family variables?
- How can teachers share information about the effects of family variables on bullying and advocate for the optimal authoritative style?
- Are the effects of family variables on school bullying the same in the New Zealand context? Due to a lack of New Zealand studies on family variables in discriminating bullying behaviour, more research is required.

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